PRESCRIPTION FOR GREATNESS
Luke 22:24-27
May 24, 1981

One of my abiding interests is the lowland gorillas of West Africa. The species is severely endangered: some think the end is in sight and in recent years a flurry of zoological and anthropolical study has produced some utterly fascinating reading. I am intrigued, for instance, by the sophisticated social organization which exists in a family of gorillas. The family consists of perhaps a dozen males, females and youngsters, led by a mature, silver-back male. He is ~~strongest, brightest~~. The others defer to him. He decides when to stop foragging and sleep. He uses elaborate signals to communicate danger, fear, aggression, caring. He is the boss. He has greatness, status, prestige and he thoroughly enjoys it.

In fact the more I read about social stratification and the prerogatives of status in gorilla society, the more I am convinced that the difference between the inner-personal behavioral dynamics in a family of gorillas and a group of lawyers or business people or ministers, ~~or a random group at a party is minimal~~. My reading leads me to believe that the gorillas may be more gentle with one another but that, all in all, rank, privilege, status, greatness, are essential dynamics for everyone involved.

There is no more important nor interesting human characteristic. Status and its prerogatives permeate our culture. Conspicuous symbols such as the clothes you wear, the automobile you drive and the house in which you live tell about your status. Less conspicuous symbols tell even more: your choice of wine, vacation spot and according to the Preppy Handbook, the dog you own and the decor of your den.

Clergy have a real problem with the whole matter of rank. We represent, it is assumed, a philosophy which rejects the whole concept of rank, privilege and status. Charles Merrill Smith in his hilarious How to Become a Bishop Without Being Religious, advised us to chose our status symbols with great care. Obviously no one will trust a minister who drives a flashy car, or is married to a flashy spouse or who vacations for a month each year in Las Vegas. Smith urged other-worldly status symbols, slightly ethereal, always inexpensive. ("Books I have read") I have discovered is an accepted symbol of clergy status. "Professors under whom I have studied," and "Universities I have attended" do very nicely. ("Souls I have saved") is not effective for Presbyterians; ("Money I have raised") is a little heavy handed, but successful stewardship and/or evangelism programs will earn admiring glances from peers. For awhile, mostly in the sixties, considerable status surrounded the category of ("situations from which I was fired,") or a variation on the theme ("pulpit committees who were horrified by my commitment to social justice.")

The impulse toward status and privilege is deep in us. Our society, at bedrock level, grants greatness to those who excel. It is not, in this society, a matter of family, rigid classification, inherited privilege. You can earn it here. If you can pitch a baseball faster than anybody else, sell more automobiles, or build better mousetraps, you will enjoy status. The impulse toward status becomes, in our society, the impulse to excel and to enjoy the prerogatives. The impact on our part of human civilization has been remarkable

That dynamic is so real in our humanity that repeated efforts to eliminate it have failed rather miserably. I have cited the imagination clergy use in divising acceptable symbols of status. Even the monks got caught up in status seeking based on humility, outdoing one another in charity and devotion. On a grand scale Marxism has tried to strike a blow at the very heart of the dynamic. The Marxist ideal is a classless state: no status, no privilege, all contributing on the basis of ability, all receiving on the basis of need. But a recent Harvard study located no fewer than ten identifiable social levels in Soviety society. (*) You can change the vocabulary, but apparently there is something in us that strenously resists the elimination of all ranking. In fact, that is so deeply a part of us that a counter dynamic occurs on occasion. Sometimes it is appropriate to telegraph your position by deliberately rejecting the

(*) each with visible symbols and tangible prerogatives.

commonly accepted symbols of greatness. Youth culture has always done that, of course, merely substituting one set of symbols for another. But on a broader scale there has always been a certain charm to the Chief Executive Officer who drives a Pinto and the University President who wears bluejeans. The counter dynamic is, "if you really have it, you don't have to flaunt it."

There is something of this in our text this morning. The story is in Matthew, Mark and Luke with slight variation only. Matthew and Mark place the incident on the road to Jerusalem: Luke puts it at the Last Supper. Matthew has the mother of James and John ask the embarrassing question. special privilege for her sons: Mark and Luke tell us the argument arose among the disciples about rank. The common thread was that the disciples' timing was atrocious, and their sense of appropriateness almost embarrassing. The situation is full of tension. Jesus has just broken the bread and poured the wine in the last meal they will eat together. The sublime and mystical words - "This is my body. This cup is God's new covenant," have just been uttered. A reference to betrayal has stunned them and at that very moment, Luke writes, "an argument broke out among the disciples as to which of them should be thought of as the greatest." That's down-right embarrassing, tasteless, the kind of thing our children do to us, fighting over who gets to sit by the window on the way home from church to the funeral; disputing about who gets the biggest piece of cake before grace is concluded. Jesus is talking about communion, covenant, death, betrayal and his dearest

and best friends are arguing over who is the greatest.

The scholars suggest that the disciples thought they were on their way to a coup de etat; that they fully expected Jesus' entrance to the city on Friday to set off the revolution which would result in them ending up with real political power. You can't prove that of course, but it is at least plausible that the men who were arguing thought that they were about to become the new rulers of Jerusalem.

In any event what we think should happen doesn't. Jesus does not critize the disciples for their tastelessness. He does not go after the fact that the very premise of the discussion, namely that disciples of Jesus ~~have a legitimate interest in~~ should worry about greatness, is wrong. That's how we would do it. We'd let them ~~tasteless, insensitive fellows~~ know the exact nature of their error. Instead of that, however, Jesus actually extends the conversation. Greatness in the world, he tells them, has to do with power and authority. Not so with you. If you want to be great, you will have to be like a servant. In fact, the greatest one among you - the topic of your argument will be the servant of all.

It's not that the impulse to excel is wrong, that is to say. It's not that it's inappropriate to want to be great. It's not the impulse but the definition. Basic humanity keeps looking OK when reflected by Jesus. It's the nuance, the subtlety, the definition that becomes the

vehicle of sin. Greatness - the impulse toward greatness - isn't bad. It's just that we use the wrong definition, ~~needs to be altered~~

I flinch, frankly, whenever I hear someone refer to a church as "great." I flinch because I have learned that what people mean when they say that is that a church has important people on its membership rolls, or that it has a big building, or a lot of money or great music, or that it is growing by leaps and bounds. I flinch because the church, too often, simply allows the culture to write the dictionary. ("The cultural captivity of the Gospel") is what the theologians call it and what it means is that the churches often simply think of themselves as small General Motors, ~~Corporations~~ versions of who can be evaluated on the basis of production, sales and profit. Thus, great churches look and feel like successful businesses; strong, muscular, vital.* Beware when churches are called great! Not, please understand, because it is inherently wrong for a church to be strong and successful: not at all! It's just that there is only one kind of greatness that matters if we're talking about churches and not industries or symphony orchestras or ~~baseball~~ football teams, and that is service.

Expanding like Wendy's.

(~~SUNDAY ONLY~~) I believe Broad Street Presbyterian Church is a great church. I take delight in its greatness. I love the fact of its strength. I appreciate its tremendous resources. I'm particularly grateful for its history of

faithfulness and its willingness to strengthen itself in each succeeding generation. What a privilege to be part of it! What an exciting privilege to be here through the chapter of the story that began an hour ago!

But it seems to me to be imperative, particularly today to hear and to understand that the only greatness that matters at all has to do with service. We propose to raise and spend a lot of money. We believe that to do it will strengthen this church for continued life into another generation. And it is very important to hear and understand that the reason for it all is not the greatness that accompanies bricks and mortar, budgets and architectural beauty, but the greatness which belongs to the servant of all.

In a very good book on the Theology of the Church, Colin Williams of Yale Divinity School, writes that the church is best characterized as "an on-going service project." That surprised me when I read it. We have heard many times that the church is not a building. We have been taught that the word "church" refers to people: the communion of saints, the invisible body of Christ throughout the world today. How interesting to think about church as a project, a continuing activity the essential nature of which is service. Williams observes that there was a time, not long ago, when the church was very much a part of the establishment; when it could command and control. That time

is gone now and all that is left for us, he writes, is to serve - which is what we are about anyway." (New Directions in Theology Today, Vol. IV, The Church)

There is evidence that we are learning how to live without the cultural status which once simply came with the territory. There is evidence that we are rediscovering the power and joy of servanthood. Mother Teresa has become the symbol of a new Christian greatness. Of the dying her Sisters of Charity pick up off the streets of Calcutta she says, "We want them to know that there are people who really want them, who really want them at least for the few hours that they have to live. They are brought to die within the sight of a loving face." (Malcolm Muggeridge, Something Beautiful for God, p.) That, I submit, is the greatness that matters.

The limitation of preaching, of course, is ~~self~~ evident. Saying it does not make it happen. The preacher can point to the consistancy of the motif throughout the history of the people of God and the pages of the Bible. The preacher can show how a radical kernel idea grew to full flower in the writings of Isaiah and how, 2500 years ago, the people of God began to hear that God's will for his creation has something to do with service; service that often carries with it a very dear price. ~~B~~ From the beginning one thing further has been necessary - namely conversion.

But talking about it doesn't make it a reality.

May I suggest that conversion is exactly what the topic requires? Conversion means changing, turning around and going in another direction, becoming something new. It does not necessarily mean an instantaneous, emotional upheaval. But it must happen. Becoming a Christian is a life-long task of being converted and may I suggest that the cutting edge of that personal change is when one's behavior, values, attitudes, priorities, goals and plans come more and more under the Lordship of Jesus Christ?

That's not a simple process, nor an easy one. Hugh T. Kerr, editor of Theology Today, wrote once that "the summons to Christian discipleship is not an invitation to a tea party." I believe it is a summons to conversion, an invitation to a process of changing and growing and becoming and I am convinced that the cutting edge is here: at the very point that we define greatness. I believe that the most dramatic, dynamic and powerful development in our culture would be a new definition of greatness as servant-hood. I know that it would be the most vital thing that could happen to a church.

And I am convinced that there is nothing more important for anyone of us personally. I am convinced that Jesus was right: that he was right when he turned everything upside down by submitting that it is more blessed to give than to receive, more happy to love than to be loved, more

gratifying to spend your life than to hoarde save it. I am convinced that the Kingdom of God which commanded so very much of his attention exists when people like you and me begin to understand all that and be converted to it influenced by it and ~~influenced by it~~. I am convinced that he knew exactly what he was talking about when he said:

> "the greatest one among you must be like the youngest, and the leader must be like the servant."

AMEN.

God of love, help us to change, to grow, to leave behind stale, worn out values. Patient God, give us courage to serve when everyone else is trying desparately to be served. Stand with us: call new faith, new life out of us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

~~Ordination Service~~

The Order for Ordination & Installation in the bulletin